

PBA fire department competing for Army FD of Year

by Rachel Newton

Pine Bluff Arsenal strives to be the best in every aspect of its operations – from ammunition and chemical/biological production to the great individuals working on post every day. It comes as no surprise that the PBA Fire Department strives to be their best, as they compete for a top ranking Army-wide.

As the runner up in the small fire department of the year for the Army's Installation Management Command-West Region, PBA is now competing in that same category for Army Fire Department of the Year. "There are 109 Army installations that have fire departments and every year there is a very spirited competition for best in the Army," said Tom Braumuller, Arsenal fire chief. "It is split into two groups – small category and large category (which means there are two or more fire stations on the installation)."

Sixty percent of the total departments fall under the small category, according to Braumuller. "Fort Sam Houston – the IMCOM-West winner – was also chosen to go forward to compete," he said. "Since only five regions compete, if you look at it numbers wise, PBA was one of the top six fire departments in the Army for 2006. So, this is actually quite an honor just to be selected to compete."

Braumuller explained that the top Army winner will go on to compete against the other military branches for best in the Department of Defense.

The competition is broken down into categories – customer service; department level awards, accreditations, certifications and other recognitions; innovativeness; implemented quality management principles and initiatives; quality of life initiatives; and other (which can include community activities, etc.). "You are only allowed to submit your competition package on one 8 ½ by 11 page with one inch margins with no less than a 10 point font," he said. "It is very strict. What they look for is a well-balanced department that takes care of itself, community and neighboring communities. Evidently, we fit the bill."

Feedback on PBA's competition package, according to Braumuller, is that the Arsenal is right on the money. "Our package was a good tight package," he said. "We are the only special installation that was selected in our region to compete. PBA is also the only fire department that performs rescue and decon in the chemical storage areas. All the other fire departments stand back on the clean side of a hotline and wait until the patients are brought to them. We are unique in that fact."

He said that some of the items that caught the judges eyes are the fact that the fire department helps maintain and test over 350 hydrants a year on the installation; during a self operational readiness inspection (ORI), PBA scored a 95; in the Army Fire and Safety program, the PBA fire department is 97 percent compliant, which according to Braumuller is one of the highest compliant ratings in the Army; the PBA FD is the emergency response element in the ISO 14001; no findings were received by the department during the annual CSEPP (Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program) exercise; the department has instituted over 100 SOPs and guidelines for emergency response; and the department has also implemented the Firefighter Near Miss Program.

"If a firefighter feels like he or she came very close to being injured, was injured or in a near accident, he can submit a report to this program anonymously. The data is then collected and put into a report of the week and sent out nationwide," said Braumuller. "This allows other departments to watch out for these types of scenarios."

In the area of quality of life, Braumuller explained that a remodel was done of the kitchen, dining area, dispatch area, training area and lounge at the station. "We modernized the physical fitness room and obtained forestry funding for the outfitting of wildland equipment. Using a takeoff of lean six sigma, the department has taken the principals and concepts, and streamlined operations," he said. "Instead of coming back several times to a building to inspect certain things, we do a thorough inspection of all the systems one time – therefore we only disturb our customers once. We hit all the elements during one stop."

The PBA fire department has become more of a community-based fire department, said Braumuller. "We support the installation Equal Employment Opportunity office with 'Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day' as well as Child and Youth Services/Army Community Service KidFest. The department has also installed a community fire/barbecue pit at the fire station," he said. "We have had housing residents come over for family marshmallow roasts."

The department has also signed a mutual aid agreement and has an automatic aid agreement with the City of White Hall. "We are one of the primary training sites currently for wildland firefighting for the state of Arkansas," said Braumuller. "There are four instructors here on post. We can bring the students in and certify them as wildland firefighters. There is a two-fold reason for this – one it provides us more mutual aid and more exposure in the community, but on the other hand if we ever have a large fire here on the Arsenal involving the woodlands or grass, I know there are trained people out there in the community that can help us."

PBA firefighters work hard, he said. "They have been working really hard over the past 3 years and our next step is accreditation," said Braumuller. "Once this is hanging on the wall, this tells the Arsenal that you have a world-class fire department. We have certain standards that we set for ourselves – including customer care, response times, etc. – which we have to meet."

The panel that selects the winners is not even in the fire service on the first round, according to Braumuller. "The package has to be written in such a way that an average person, outside of the fire service, can understand it," he said. "When competing Army-wide, fire service people judge it. For DoD, it is a select panel of people outside DoD in fire industry."

The official winner announcement should come out sometime in June, according to Braumuller. "It is tough. We are competing against my old installation – Fort Monmouth (N.J.). If we don't win, I just want to beat them," he joked. "All the departments are good. They have all got their unique missions. We compete when we are ready to compete and this is the first time we have been in the running. This is the first year that we have a good shot at it."

The PBA fire departments entry in the competition speaks very highly of the staff, said Braumuller. "We have good support from our directorate as well as PBA command," he said. "It give a validation to the people on the Arsenal that they are being protected by some of the best firefighters in the Army."